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## On Entertaining Book Agents.

There are many people who have an inherited phobia for book agents as some people have for cats, who are in trepidation at their approach and whose normal procedures are inhibited by their proximity. With such the advent of any stranger at their door throws them into alarm, for if the visitor is not a friend, then indeed she is an agent.

But there is a minority of others who can maintain a normal pulse even with a book agent in their best parlor. To this minority I belong through no grace of my own. I was simply born that way. I never could see the economy of ridding oneself of a book agent by buying of her wares. Like feeding the organ grinder's monkey with pennies, it only encouraged another visit; or like giving a pie to a tramp, your generosity was repaid in the marking of your house so that other tramps might enjoy a similar repast. I will not press any further resemblance between an honest book agent wishing to turn an honest penny, and a tramp or a monkey, but some of us prefer to dispense our small benevolences in other ways or buy our music in other forms. For my part, there is nothing I like better than to browse in bookstore or library, and the ignominy of being offered predigested, cereal literature is deep and irritating.

Of all books, those you would be most particular about choosing for yourself are religious books. And as a matter of fact, it seems that these are the very ones high in the esteem of the agent - second only to compendiums of facts-every-one-pught-to-have-on-hand, whose crowning and often only virtue is their compactness. I fancy that this preference for peddling religious books is due to the element of superstition in human nature. The agent feels sure that some mystical motive will compel you to buy, and that the chance of finding a convincing - or at least satisfactory - philosophy of life within the covers of her particular book, will tempt you, otherwise austere and wary, to indulge.

But I repeat. I belong to the minority who can say a polite but firm No, and can look an agent in the eye while doing so. Indeed, it is the most effective way of speeding her departure. But there was one agent who would not take No for an answer, and I was contemplating employing the method of last resort - namely walking to the door with her and tactfully putting her out. She was urging me to buy some religious book whose cover alone repulsed me. An inspiration came. I told the agent I did not want the book because I was a New Churchman, or what some people called a Swedenborgian. Of course that was no argument, but it staggered the book agent. Here was something she had not reckoned for - an entirely new species of animal. She had the expression of dropping her jaw, but if it did drop it was imperceptible. She said not a word more, but departed quickly and forever, leaving me staring after her in silent amusement. Such was my talisman.

Now a book agent who comes to your house and announces herself you can forgive even if you reject, but the one who steals into your house unbidden and unannounced is an abomination. It was on a winter's afternoon when I was indulging in a long-cherished leisure time at my desk that the telephone rang. A polite voice at the other end hinted that its owner knew a college friend of mine, and as she was passing through the city, could she stop in to see me until train time - that is, if it were perfectly convenient. I asked, rather casually, the name of our common friend, but she evidently misunderstood me, for instead, she gave me hers, and hastened to assure me that if it were at all inconvenient of course she would not impose upon my time. Immediately I blamed myself for my inhospitality and timidity, and told her that she would be welcome. She promised to come at three, so my hopes for a peaceful afternoon were shattered and I gave myself up to the emergency. After the first preliminary remarks of greeting were exchanged, I asked her quite explicitly about our common friend. Then and only then did it dawn upon me what manner of person my caller was. She glibly proceeded to explain away my little "misunderstanding" of her relationship. (How well she concealed the twinkle that must have lurked in her eye!) She did not know a particular college friend of mine, but simply

"my college", (and her knowledge of that was painfully limited). As so many of my "fellow alumnae" were interested in this scheme for "home education" she felt sure I would be. (Of course!) The idea was that when one had been out of college for - here she tactfully paused - "well, a number of years", one's interest in things intellectual flagged. Here was an extension course, so to speak, in - a little of everything, as a matter of fact, but why repeat. My first impulse was to tell her very plainly that having gained admission to my hearth and home under false colors, she least she could do would be to leave at once. But something tickled my funny bone just then. Perhaps it was dormant deviltry, but deviltry tinged with the interest of a psychological experiment. She had begged for a chance to be heard even though I bought not, and to my protests she vowed she would not grudge the time. (Her train, I presume, did not leave until evening!) My conscience was clear, and I settled back. She should have hearing a-plenty.

Probably never before had she been accorded such attention. She thrived under it; she grew oratorical, eloquent, fervent, and appealed with a deceptively disinterested passion. She had not been to college herself, but here at last, she had found in her wares an equivalent. She continued without let or hindrance in this vein. She had been wound up; now she was unwinding. Gradually her speech slackened. Before long she was talking in nervous circles, yet she avoided the point - the price. Evidently a sphinx-like listener was disconcerting. But the sphinx was not so calm within - she was having emotions which were nearly spilling over. My sympathies all but gave way toward the end when, because she was so reduced for words, she was forced to tell me the price. Humiliation profound. If it had been a bargain, it would have out long ago. But this course in universal knowledge in sixty installments came dear. Such comprehensive wisdom cannot be attained at bargain prices, whatever the method. Still did she maintain silence, merely nodding my head now and then to show that I was giving an attentive ear. She at last rose to go. Never was victory more certain and complete, - a book agent leaving voluntarily! For the first time she now asked me outright if I would buy. Why she had not employed this tactic before baffled me. But she had not. She had simply floundered. Now that her defeat was accomplished I was ready to be communicative. I told her that it was so serious a problem that I would have to think it over. It was not just the money, (I said this unflinchingly), for I realized that sixty-five dollars was little enough for the value offered, but it was the stupendousness of the bargain. I questioned whether it were not contrary to the laws of nature for me to have within my grasp such comprehensive learning, such a universe in even sixty nutshells. I felt I must use caution. But I had a young friend preparing to enter college. Perhaps - . She put aside my remarks as superfluous and pressed me for a definite answer, which I gave in the negative. She was rallying now. This had more the air of her usual battlegrounds, and, so as not to appear disheartened, she offered to telephone me in a day or two to see if I had changed my mind. I raised no objection - but as a matter of fact I, of course, never heard from her again.

I have often wondered how my Lines of Fate would have altered had I bought universal knowledge in sixty installments. But more than that have I wondered if the book agent herself ever got rewound, to entertain other resigned souls whom she might unscrupulously force to entertain her.

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